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Management from the Nova School of Business and Economics.

**SMES ON THEIR JOURNEY TOWARDS CORPORATE
SUSTAINABILITY MANAGEMENT:
EXPLORING ENABLING FACTORS FOR ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION**

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Abstract

This paper explores the journey of SMEs aiming to integrate corporate sustainability management into their businesses. Through empirical, qualitative methods, the real, lived experience of SMEs was studied to uncover which features of management and reporting tools could help SMEs overcome hurdles on their path to adopting and implementing strategic sustainability management. The insights that emerge serve to inform the development of more tailored and relevant tools that enable organisations to turn intention into action through strategic support and peer-driven communities of best practices.

Keywords: SMEs, Corporate Sustainability Management, Management Tools, Sustainable Development Goals, Sustainability Reporting

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I. Introduction

With 10 years left to achieve the Agenda 2030's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to address pressing social, environmental and economic challenges globally, the private sector is being solicited more than ever to play a crucial role in safeguarding a better, sustainable future (Business and Sustainable Development Commission 2017). The scrutiny from regulators, multinational institutions, customers and future employees alike is pressuring businesses to reflect about the societal and environmental externalities of their activities and to identify opportunities to generate positive, shared value (Elkington 2002). The growth of the field of corporate sustainability (CS) in research and practice (Camilleri 2017) has enabled the emergence of frameworks to support organisations in strategizing, implementing and communicating the impact of their activities and commitment to positive change (Bonini and Bove 2014, Shoaf et al. 2018). However, whilst international standards for large, multinational corporations are widely accepted by stakeholders (UNDP 2015, GRI 2017, WBCSD 2019), it appears that smaller organisations still struggle to structure their sustainability journey (Lozano 2015, Kuhndt 2004, Johnson 2013). This is striking and raises the interrogation of the feasibility of a real sustainable transition in business practices (Revell et al. 2009, Brammer et al. 2012), if the needs of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which represent both the backbone of the economy and account for over 70% of global negative externalities, remain underserved (Shields and Shelleman 2015).

The capacity of SMEs' to adapt to new stakeholder pressures and adopt the necessary sustainability management and reporting systems into their operational and competitive considerations has been widely understudied (Revell et al. 2009). Indeed, although endless numbers of tools and methodologies have been emerged to jumpstart SMEs' sustainability management journeys, Johnson and Schlategger (2015) deplore the lack of adoption and implementation in the space. Whilst normative and theoretical studies have investigated the

availability of such tools for SMEs, this research paper chooses to address the lack of empirical research into first-hand accounts of managers and practitioners when deciding to engage resource-constrained organisations with CS (Kiron et al. 2013). It aims to inform a more appropriate provision of solutions to support the journey of all businesses, big and small, towards more responsible and future-proof strategies by uncovering the lived experience of the utility and relevance of sustainability management tools or “universal standards” like the United Nation’s SDG framework (Shoaf et al. 2018, Pizzia et al. 2020). This research thus builds on Johnson (2013), Johnson and Schlategger’s (2015) and Shields and Shellemans’ (2015, 2017)’s work to investigate which features of sustainability management tools can appropriately respond to SME’s reality and further business’ role in addressing global environmental, social and economic challenges.

Considering the lack of academic work in the space of SMEs corporate sustainability, the exploratory nature of this research project warranted an inductive interpretivist lens (Denzin and Lincoln 2018, Sharma et al. 2018). The research was designed around two widely used initiatives, which served as proxies to unearth insights into the journey of defining and implementing sustainability practices. On one hand, the B Lab’s holistic and business-oriented *B Impact Assessment (BIA)* tool is investigated as a suitable starting point for smaller organisations (Shields and Shelleman 2017), and on the other, the UNDPs global SDG framework, is scrutinized for its global reach, widespread awareness and intended potency as a universal standard (Pizzia et al. 2020). The collection of qualitative data from purposefully sampled SME managers and enabling professionals (consultants) through semi-structured interviews served to uncover rich accounts of ambitions, perception and user-experience of sustainability related management and reporting tools in the field. In addition, these personal conversations proved crucial to clarify individual contextual and conceptual understandings of this field, as well as of the respective definitions of the “appropriateness” or “relevance” of

tools, which is fundamentally value laden (Arsel 2017, Flick et al. 2004). Key insights collected from 13 interviews were iteratively analysed to highlight SMEs specific needs and their critical evaluation of the solution space provided to cater to them, enriching the awareness of practitioners and researchers about the key tenants of appropriate and relevant sustainability management tools for SMEs.

As the global trend towards CS shows no sign of slowing down (Camilleri 2017), this paper contributes to understanding how the access of SMEs to relevant, potent tools, accelerating the materialisation of strategic sustainability management could be facilitated (Shields and Shelleman 2015, Tsalis et al. 2013). By analysing the rich data collected from practitioners in the field, it confers deeper insights about what features are valued by SMEs, the extent to which dominant tools are addressing them and how to tailor them for actionable, untaxing implementation and use (Johnson 2013). This ought to contribute to the design of solutions creating a “path of least resistance” for SMEs, particularly those who do not yet perceive this shift to be attainable (Shields and Shelleman 2017).

II. Literature Review

2.1 Corporate Sustainability: towards the new normal?

In the past decades, the business landscape has been increasingly shaped and influenced by external events, new opportunities brought about by technology and the rising challenges of climate change, social inequality and ever more globalised crises (Sachs 2012). Providing solutions to these multinational issues is no longer perceived to be the sole role of governments or international organisations: the private sector is increasingly perceived as a key catalyst in driving about change. Looking to the future, companies large and small can no longer ignore their responsibility as a societal actor, not only through efforts of transparency and stakeholder engagement, but by truly re-evaluating the net value they provide to society (Camilleri 2017).

Built on the pillars of sustainable development, corporate responsibility, stakeholder management and corporate accountability, CS strategies ought to “meet the needs of a firm's direct and indirect stakeholders (such as shareholders, employees, clients, pressure groups, communities, etc.), without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well” (Dyllick and Hockerts 2002). Camilleri’s work (2017, 2018) poses a strong business case for this ambition through a compelling approach to sustainability focusing on enhancing economic performance, innovation, operational excellence, competitiveness and consumer relations, turning it into a strategic factor rather than peripheral, compliance or communication-driven initiatives.

2.2 SMEs: the 99% left behind?

Despite being long considered to concern only large multinationals, it is now evident that a global shift in corporate responsibility and sustainability cannot be truly successful without the buy-in and collective efforts of Small and Medium Enterprises (<250 employees, EC 2019). Although they appear to remain largely unaware of their contribution to over 70% of global externalities (Revell et al. 2010) and their potential to accelerate durable solutions, SMEs represent a considerable missing link on the path to a transition to sustainable business (Johnson 2013). In their role as the backbone of local, regional and national economies, representing almost 99% of all businesses and 60% of value added across the OECD (OECD 2019), but also, inevitably, as part of complex value chains, small businesses are being confronted with rising pressure from the market to monitor, manage and communicate about their impact on society and the environment (Bos-Brouwers 2010, Shields and Shelleman 2017). SMEs face growing supply chain scrutiny and compliance programs, as well as consumers’ push for more responsible and accountable business practices (Sharma et al. 2018). Developing strong sustainability management strategies and reporting effectively to all stakeholders is becoming a significant asset for smaller businesses, creating new competitive

advantages, stronger brands, and long-term operational efficiency, whilst also attracting talent (Conway 2014, Tsalis et al. 2013).

SMEs, like other corporations seeking to begin their journey towards CS, face the need to identify issues and actions material to them, as well as measure and track their performance along relevant indicators (Shields and Shelleman 2015). Globally, a wide range of tools, methodologies and frameworks are continuously being developed to inform better management decisions based on the collection of data across all business areas, as well as induce the development of corporate policies and processes which foster responsible practices towards all relevant stakeholder groups (Kuhndt 2004, Lozano 2012, Lozano 2015, Johnson and Schaltegger 2015, Baumgartner 2013). The field of sustainability reporting, which enables and underpins greater corporate transparency on non-financial performance, has been in ebullition over the past two decades, with large financial institutions, international organisations and nations defining sets of standards and metrics through which to communicate with stakeholders, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) or the Global Impact Investing Network's IRIS metrics (GRI 2017, English and Schooley 2014).

Nonetheless, these consistent, comprehensive tools and initiatives, which have been widely adopted by the large, international corporations they target, have largely left smaller, more resource-stricken organisations out of the equation (Enderle 2004, Perrini et al. 2007). As such, the growing market demands for sustainability efforts from SMEs have been supported by a blooming nexus of smaller impact-management, sustainability-strategy, CSR-rating tools and methodologies, unfortunately resulting in a crowded and unclear landscape for businesses beginning to engage with the formalization of their sustainability journey (Johnson and Schaltegger 2015). Indeed, Johnson's (2013) extensive study of the awareness and implementation of sustainability management and reporting tools by SMEs questions the adoption of such tools, positing that smaller companies remain moderately aware and lag

behind in the implementation of sustainability management systems (Brammer et al. 2012, Shields and Shelleman 2017). The complexity and resource-intensiveness of these widespread tools is addressed by scholars arguing that despite apparently favourable governance structures and organisational cultures, SMEs tend to lack the awareness, understanding and dedicated staff to engage with CS (Bos-Brouwers 2009, Cassels and Lewis 2011, Shields and Shelleman 2015). The specificity of SMEs' relationship with such tools is nonetheless still underrepresented in the literature (Witte and Dilyard 2017, Bos-Brouwers 2009, Perrini et al. 2007) and practice, as organisations report a lack of appropriate tools and frameworks to understand, evaluate and implement strategic sustainability in their businesses (Brammer 2012, Kiron et al. 2013).

2.3 From holistic view of business to holistic view of sustainability: where to start?

In light of SMEs' resource-strain, the work of Witjes et al. (2015) and Shields and Shelleman (2017) points towards the value of tools that allow for a holistic approach to CS, integrating material issues into a centralized framework overarching functions or departments. An increasingly popular example, albeit mostly among companies strongly committed to strategizing sustainability (Hoffman et al. 2012, Hiller 2013) is the B Impact Assessment and Certification (BIA) launched in 2008 by the B-Lab. Seeking to bring alignment and guidance to companies beginning to integrate and balance societal, environment and economic concerns into their management systems or business models, it provides a key-in hand, questions- and points-based assessment and certification process. Gehman et al. (2019) and Schaltegger et al. (in press) underline the differentiating advantage of the BIA through its focus on accompanying businesses in reconciling economic goals with broader, triple bottom line-based value creation, simultaneously offering a holistic, operative and strategic evaluation.

Whilst it remains broadly underexplored in academic literature, the value of tools like the BIA to drive prosocial change by assisting corporations' self-assessment, monitoring and goal

setting has been identified (Sharma et al. 2018). Particularly, the community of practice that it can create by providing scores and best practices from peers and highlighting relevant, actionable cues or paths for improvement is generating positive, double-loop learning opportunities (Marquis and Lee 2015). The power of communication of the B-Corp brand, in combination with its strengthening partnerships with established standard-setters such as the GRI and the UNDP (through the recent SDG Action Manager tool, for example), is also beginning to attract more and more organisations to undertake this self-assessment and identify their shortcomings, unintended impact and avenues for rapidly implementing and embedding more responsible practices (Moroz and Gamble 2020).

At the other end of the spectrum, the SDGs have also been lauded as a potent framework to align all businesses in tackling the environmental, social and economic grand challenges faced by society in the 21st century (George et al. 2016, United Nations 2015). The Agenda 2030 sets goals, objectives and targets to structure solution-building at the macro, meso and micro level with the intention to create a common language and align and aggregate action across scales, stakeholders and sectors (Weybrecht 2017). Whilst previous sustainable development agendas were mainly the responsibility of governments and the non-profit sector, the SDGs aim to highlight the role of businesses as a catalyst towards progress, building solutions and reducing negative externalities (Sachs 2012, Muff et al. 2017, Schönherr et al. 2017). Many scholars see them as a compelling framework to both structure and manage sustainability and impact more coherently (Lozano 2015, Siebenhüner and Arnold 2007), whilst others emphasize the opportunity they provide to identify new sources of competitive advantage (Sullivan et al. 2018), opening avenues for novel business models and more refined value propositions that bring innovative solutions to current challenges across the globe (Bocken et al. 2014, Geissdoerfer et al. 2018, Weybrecht 2015).

Although it represents a vigorous call to action for the business sector, increasing awareness of key issues and areas of impact to be considered and tackled (Shoaf et al. 2018), the extent to which businesses are truly engaging in setting quantitative metrics and strategic plans to link their performance to these universal standards remains widely unexplored (Amey and Whooly 2018). Whilst the sustainability performance measurement and reporting community (e.g. GRI, WBCSD, IRIS, etc.) has widely adopted and supported the use of the SDGs as guideline for MNEs' reporting strategies, (Dyllick and Muff 2017, Bebbington et al. 2017, Bebbington and Unerman 2018), there is little academic evidence of their suitability and integration as a business standard (Pizzia et al. 2020, Shields and Shelleman 2017). In an attempt to bridge the macro-level focus and absence of direct translation into business-level indicators (Schramade 2017, Rosati and Faria 2019), the leading institutions dominating business-driven sustainable development have developed additional tools to bring organisations to understand their connection with the SDGs and set their goals and measurement standards against them, translating intent into strategic actions (for example, the SDG Global Compass (GRI, WBCSD, UNGC), SDG Action Manager, Business Call to Action and SDG Impact Labs (UNDP) and SDG Action Manager (UNGC and B-LAB)). The latest in the series, the SDG Standards for Enterprises (*in press*), focuses on developing a handbook of best practices accessible by businesses and enablers to connect practitioners more closely with the goals.

III. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The exploratory intentions of this research project translated into an inductive interpretivist approach (Denzin and Lincoln 2018) to uncover and make sense of the subjective, shared or conflicting experiences of participants. This was considered particularly relevant considering the still emergent and contested definitions of the concepts of sustainability, sustainability management tools and related topics of inquiry (Camilleri 2017, Johnson 2013). Indeed, the

empirical investigation of managers' experience with sustainability and related management tools is underrepresented in the literature. The interview-driven inquiry around concepts of "appropriateness" and "utility" of given tools and frameworks is inevitably value-laden and influenced by each individual's views and definitions, rendering it critical to design the research around personal accounts and experiences (Arsel 2017, Flick et al. 2004). The purposeful and systematic conduct of semi-structured interviews and subsequent thematic qualitative data analysis support the research aims of uncovering themes through the rich accounts of participants' experiences and beliefs (Arsel 2017, Berg and Lune 2012).

3.2 Data Collection

Collecting data to explore the research objectives focused on qualitative empirical methods fostering a complex and rich view of the intersection of practice and theory around sustainability management approaches and the relevance of the SDGs (Arsel 2017).

Sampling Procedures

In an attempt to understand perspectives from stakeholders in the field, a purposive sampling process identified two, non-mutually exclusive, categories of crucial interview participants (Johnson and Clarke 2006). "Enablers" were selected for their experience promoting practices around sustainability reporting and management, supporting organisations on their journey as well as develop thought leadership around emerging trends in this space, such as the BIA or the SDG framework. Their work with a multitude of clients provides a broader spectrum of experiences as their perspective aggregates insights collected from a wide range of organisations over time and geographies, compensating for the limited number of interviewees considering the time and scope of this study. This complements the personal experience of "Users" entrepreneurs and managers who committed to the integration of such concepts and practices in their business activities or are beginning to engage with the topic and related tools, among others the BIA or the SDGs. Participants were contacted through the researcher's

personal network and targeted internet (LinkedIn) searches, leading to the successful conduct of a total of 13 interviews, 8 with “Enablers” and 5 with “Users” (Appendix A).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Generating data from the selected participants through semi-structured interviews provided the right balance between the degree of freedom given to the participant to co-create the conversation, and the depth of focus on the themes being investigated (Arsel 2017). The use of an interview protocol (Appendix B) as a guide enabled a more intuitive and iterative discussion with each participant, leaving room for them to shape the discussion whilst maintaining a coherent frame to enable subsequent analysis (Flick et al. 2004). All participants were first asked about their organisations and the meaning of sustainability and impact to them, to fully contextualise their experience and use of key terms and concepts before diving deeper into the investigated themes. By adapting the interviews according to the respondent’s categorisation and relevant experience, deeper insights could be gained at both the micro and macro level, which provided an additional layer of inquiry. This approach also served to build a more personal and tailored rapport with the participants, considering the need to hold virtual video-conferencing interviews due to COVID-19. Interviews lasted between 25 and 50 minutes and were recorded, as agreed by participants in informed consent forms which informed them that their name or their organisations would be kept anonymous using a coded reference system.

3.3 Data Analysis

This exploratory investigation was best supported by iterative thematic coding analyses: ongoing revisions and reflections were inspired by initial data collection, inducing the adaptation of future interview questions and providing modified or additional lenses through which to scrutinise and extract insights from the data (Coffey and Atkinson 2013, Seidel 1998). Indeed, familiarisation with each transcribed data set led to a first level of inductive preliminary coding within broader, descriptive categories, allowing for the identification of recurring

patterns and categories around the knowledge, perception and use of sustainability management tools and frameworks (Gibbs 2007, Richards and Morse 2013). During the first phase of interviews, several new categories emerged as different types of actors were consulted and data was scrutinised in the light of the relevant literature; data collected with participants further into the project could then be categorised along this typology (Appendix C).

The charting phase studied these preliminary codes, refining the 286 data points (quotes) into a more insightful second-level coding which highlighted aggregated themes based on content, frequency and relevance along SMEs sustainability journey. The reflective process to both search for patterns and understand why patterns exists thus combined the coded categories into more analytically relevant insights (Coffey and Atkinson 2013, Arsel 2017). As can be studied in the Findings section below (Figure 1), the journey of SMEs from the drivers of their interest in CS, through to the identification of their needs and limitations, their interaction with market solutions and aspirations for more relevant solutions emerged clearly from the collective experiences of “enablers” and “users”.

3.4 Reflexivity and Limitations

The subjective, value-based nature of this project revolving around "more desirable" outcomes and practices cannot be neglected (Johnson and Clarke 2006). The researcher reflexively considered the influence of the choices made and the assumptions on which the research is constructed on the interpretation of the findings (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018). The iterative nature of this qualitative inquiry, reflected in reactive and reflexive probing of participants during interviews, proved to be sensitive as the researcher had to consciously refrain from reinforcing or guiding responses based on her own beliefs (Wilk 2001). Additionally, a great sensitivity to intersubjectivity was also required when identifying the nuances and clarifying definitions of key terms with participants, as cultural, linguistic and professional backgrounds led to disparate understandings of main aspects and themes encompassed in this research. The

conduct of several interviews in foreign languages and with participants for whom English is a foreign language, and subsequent transcription raised important questions and reflections about the interpretative value given by the researcher in translating concepts whose definitions and terminology remains inherently ambiguous in both the in- and output languages.

The exploratory nature of the research provided expanding areas of reflections as the field of investigation remains in its infancy and some actors remained tentative in their statements and experiences. Nonetheless, following non-responsiveness from a target participant group which would have provided some non-affiliate input, all participants were very familiar with the concepts discussed in the interviews (“preaching to the choir”), which limited the scope of the investigation away from the relevance of tools and frameworks to non-initiated actors.

IV. Findings

Inspecting the collected data provided insightful stories about SMEs CS management journeys and uncovered key trends in the perception of and experiences with given tools and their features. Whilst participants could clearly articulate the drivers leading them to initiate these strategic reflections, they also all highlighted the obstacles and obstructions along the way of turning them into actionable, practical change. The collective accounts of both managers and consultants accentuate the specific needs of these organisations, often hinting explicitly to appropriate, accessible solution factors. These findings, summarized in Figure 1, provide a comprehensive overview of participants’ interplay experiences with CS management ambitions and the tools they relied on to guide and support them. An exhaustive account of the thematic analysis can be found in Appendix D.

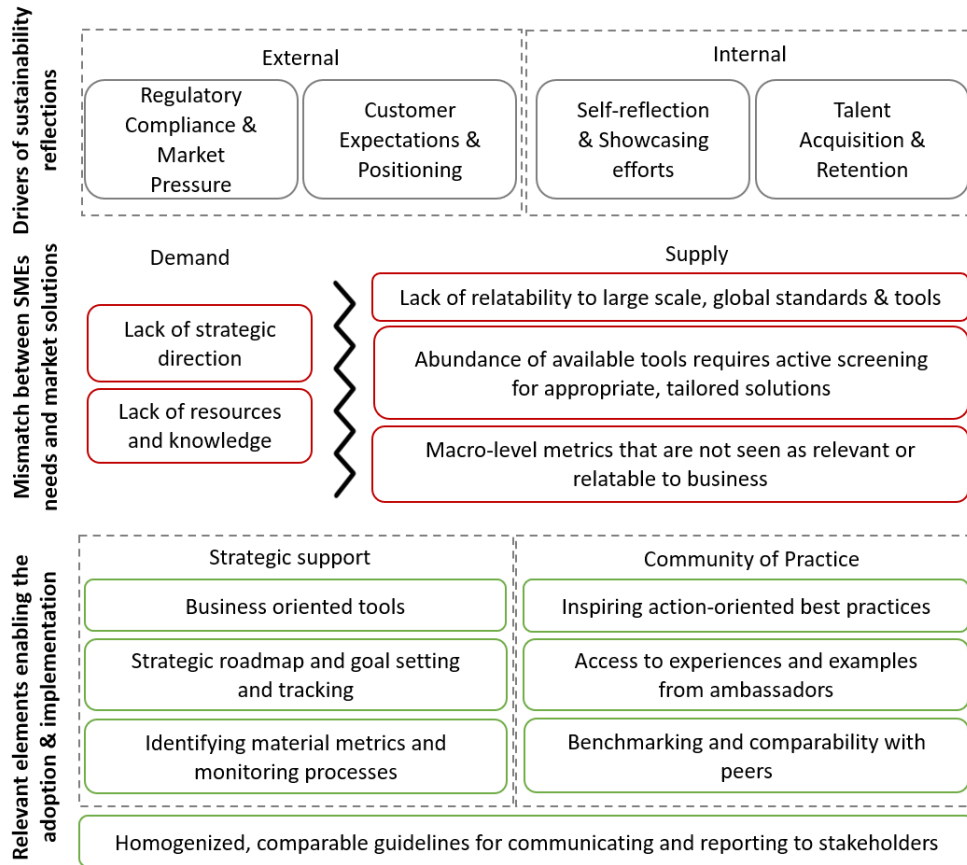


Figure 1: Drivers, obstacles and enablers of corporate sustainability management for SMEs

4.1 Drivers of sustainability reflections

Statements from managers and enablers alike pinpoint to four key drivers leading companies to reflect and take action towards managing their sustainability. Externally, regulatory scrutiny of supply chains and consumer scrutiny and expectations are confronting businesses with the need to effectively measure and communicate their performance. In parallel, enablers emphasize the rising pressure from the talent SMEs care to attract and retain, as well as a desire to understand and track their sustainability initiatives to turn it into a competitive advantage.

Most participants identified supply chain, market expectations and regulatory pressures as a driving trend across all industries, confronting SMEs with a need to formalize measurement and reporting frameworks for their sustainability-related performance:

“The regulatory landscape is pushing large businesses to report on their supply chain, so there’s pressure too for smaller actors to provide information and be more transparent, and for that they have to have some sort of system to measure and show it.” (SS)

Additionally, the recent changes in customer expectations and behaviours are increasingly being perceived as an imperative to gain market share and develop new competitive advantages through the adoption of more responsible and conscious business practices and greater transparency to stakeholders.

“They feel like the market is asking for more, and also their stakeholders, and they need to get the house clean, have evidence to back up their claims, build up pillars of responsibility to engage their stakeholders.” (SC)

Considering the purpose- and dual-mission orientation of most participants, internally driven CS ambitions appear to guide decisions and the implementation of concrete measures, as well as genuine interest in communicating about what is being done within the company.

“They have to go through a certain evaluation, and they themselves have more and more CSR assets to highlight also because they are starting to have CSR strategies and things they can talk about.” (SS)

Conscious about their ability to remain competitive and successful in the medium- to long-term, SMEs are increasingly responding to the expectations of their own teams and future, desirable talent for more corporate responsibility and proactivity from their employers.

“With time as companies themselves are changing by hiring younger people and bringing an interest in sustainability that is more than just communication related, I feel that companies are doing a better job at trying to determine their actual effect and impact.” (M)

4.2. Mismatch between SME needs and market solutions

Moving beyond interest and ambitions, SMEs appear to face a considerable number of challenges to truly engage with a serious CS strategy, complicating the path of those who are ready to invest in it. Restricted by scarce resources and capacity, organisations come short of understanding how to define their strategy, identify the relevant tools of framework to definition and measurement of material metrics and initiate policies and processes to bring it all to life.

“Everybody is speaking about the issue now, at executive level also, but then people in those trainings say: “so what do I do on Monday”, they don’t know what to do and how to bring it into action.” (BL)

“I see it as being that tension of like “This could really like matter to me my business, I should be thinking about this and be able to credibly answer it and see how it would inform my decisions, but I just like cannot find the hours of the day”, so it is a lack of resources and capacities and having to justify whatever resources you spend.” (IM)

When asked about the tools available to them, all participants report being slowed down in their implementation of a strategy due to the mismatch between supply and demand, facing demanding global standards on one side, and a cluttered abundance of various, non-homologated tools on the other. Particularly, enablers highlight the paradoxical phenomenon in which the emergence of new solutions actually comes short of addressing the needs of SMEs for a more holistic, hand-holding initiation to CS management, causing confusion and an additional hurdle instead.

“There are still too many options out there, people are constantly bringing out new tools and there is so much confusion on trying to decide which one is relevant for them. It's tough to decide which one to make a bet on: you don't want to get organised around one process

and framework and then suddenly you find out that it is not going to support how you want to position yourself internally or externally, and then you have to do another one.” (PC)

4.3 Relevant enablers of adoption and implementation

In describing their own experience with the BIA tools and the SDG framework, which were familiar to all, participants unearthed enabling factors that can constitute a solution space addressing SMEs’ needs as they begin to engage with CS issues.

Insights show a favourable inclination for more holistic tools which support an overall baseline understanding of a business’ CS across environmental, economic, social and governance dimensions. Whilst aligning with the SDG framework was often referred to as a first intention for most organisations, participants deplored the difficulty to relate with the goals, which are perceived to be very foreign from small business realities, instead requiring a lot of work and (unavailable) resources and expertise to adapt them.

“When we looked in more detail at the SDG indicators, they are hyper-macro indicators. They are not designed for business. They are not applicable or difficult to apply to small enterprises or NGOs. What we did was to think about indicators for the company first, and then make a link with the SDGs, but we never had, in any case, an indicator that was really aligned with those of the SDGs.” (SS)

Holistic tools like the BIA are on the other hand appreciated for their utility as an overarching framework and methodology which allows businesses to grasp their current situation, defining governance, business and operational factors to be measured and monitored to evaluate current and future performance.

“Since the beginning of this year and also because during the B-Corp certification we started to notice that you know, there are a lot of things that we should be measuring and that are not really being measured in a real way” (II).

“It has made us think about how we define our direct and indirect impact quantitatively and qualitatively.” (SC)

Such approaches encourage organisations to formalize their activities and processes to enable transparent review and communication, for internal and external purposes. The ability to identify high performance areas as much as aspects that call for improvement supports the development of concrete goals into a strategic roadmap.

“.. The process of going through the B impact assessment and mapping improvements based upon that, reflecting on what you do and what you want to do, we really talk about it as organizational transformation in order to future proof your business” (PC).

“The strategic ambition was always there, but the B-Corp certification structured the approach and raised additional and useful questions to formalize internally. It made us make more concrete plans to prove our commitments and make changes operationally.” (I)

The road to improvement is accelerated by practice-driven methodologies and resources which shorten the learning curves and can lead to quick, actionable implementation. The interviews bring forward the value of networks of best practices and contact to companies who have already “walked the walk”.

“It's very useful, and action, practical oriented as opposed to methodologies you have to invest a lot in learning, understanding and figuring out how to implement it.” (PC)

For example, the B-Corp network and platform arise as a high-value add for companies seeking to get started, as they can explore the case studies and contact existing B-Corps, which removes part of the intimidation.

“I found that especially for companies that do not have sustainability competencies in house, like a leader or department, I found that at the core, the B Impact Assessment and B-

Lab ecosystems provide a database of global best practices that a company can use and chose which ones to implement that align with its own priorities.” (PC)

It also encourages organisations further along their journey to be mentors, creating a collective movement.

“Our neighbours and competitors already reached out because they want to find out more about the process, it is really good news, we are inspiring others to do the right thing.” (SF)

“The network of B-Corp also makes us, beyond our own mission, be an example and lead more awareness, you are upholding a higher standard and need to be accountable for it and demonstrate that you do things better.” (IT)

4.4 Enablers of stakeholder communication

The key tenant that participants believe remains very important to address is communication. As external scrutiny and internal goodwill rise, a crucial driver of value is the companies’ ability to convince their stakeholders of their performance and improvement goals effectively and credibly. The SDG framework, for example, is widely acknowledged by all participants as a unifying, common language to describe organisations’ contribution to sustainability.

“The SDGs are very visual, in terms of communication they work very well and I think that is why they are so well regarded. It’s much easier than many other initiatives, it’s really powerful as a communication tools, and it’s not used in the best way always, but it is trendy, it can easily be integrated in companies reports and websites. It’s a universal code that is widely understood and a good stepping stone.” (B)

However, many consider them to be too broad and too easy to use without putting in the work to demonstrate the true performance against and contribution to the achievement of the SDGs.

“I think it is a challenge because it takes value out of the SDGs when you see them everywhere related to business that are not absolutely providing impact so unless you are

willing to take a step further and really understand how and why they are working on it, otherwise it means really little.” (M)

V. Analysis

Building on the emergent works of, amongst other, Johnson (2013, 2015), Shields and Shelleman (2015, 2017) and Sharma et al. (2018), this research contributes to uncover how SMEs’ transition to more rigorous sustainability management strategies and systems could be accelerated. The findings suggest that to counteract the current lack of appropriate solutions for SMEs, the development of pragmatic tools and guidelines for the sector, as well as peer-driven communities of best practices should be the foundations of a more harmonized approach to sustainability management for smaller, resource-strained organisations.

5.1 Inappropriate market solutions for SMEs

It is undeniable that SMEs will not be exempt from resorting to sustainability management in the near future, whether to face the imminent need to comply with supply chain transparency requirements (Hillary 2004, Shoaf et al. 2018) or the anticipation of attractive competitive advantages (Brammer et al. 2012, Weybrecht 2017). In alignment with the work of Tsalis et al. (2013) and George et al. (2016), the findings of this study demonstrate that practitioners recognize a wide range of drivers for their sustainability management ambitions, from traditional cost-efficiency arguments to more recent concerns about market-driven scrutiny, brand perception or talent acquisition. Particularly, the SMEs with explicit positive-impact purposes or business models, as well as those beginning to shift their efforts towards greater corporate stewardship, have identified the compelling business case of sustainability management and reporting (Bos-Brouwers 2010, Bonini and Bove 2014, Shields and Shelleman 2015). However, reinforcing the arguments led by Johnson and Schaltegger (2015), participants deplore the difficulties they face when engaging on this journey of future-proofing

their business and attempting to capture the value of CS through effective, credible communication with stakeholders (Baumgartner 2013).

Indeed, whilst the aforementioned drivers are as relevant to large corporations, a key structural factor guiding CS management creates a significant divergence. Whilst large multinational corporations are compelled by governmental and financial regulators to transparently communicate their extra-financial information using structured frameworks and standards such as the GRI or SASB (Camilleri 2018, Shoaf et al. 2018), the market-driven scrutiny of SMEs, such as supply chain requirements or customer information, is much more heterogeneous. The rich conversations undertaken uncovered a crucial, two-sided obstacle in this space: firstly, a sense of intimidation by comprehensive, standardised tools such as the GRI, which have been developed and designed for large corporations with dedicated capacities (Lee 2009, Perrini et al. 2007) leads to a feeling of inappropriateness and unsuitability. On the other hand, the abundance of different requests for data and the emergence of new tools “blooming from all sides” (SS) overwhelm businesses who lack the time and the knowledge to sort through them and assess the most relevant ones to their own organisation (Witjes et al 2015).

This shortcoming between demand and supply of solutions was already outlined by Hillary (2000) and Revell and Blackburn (2007), and more thoroughly studied by Johnson (2013). The specific empirical methodology used in this research contributed to the understanding of the pressure felt by companies and their managers, who are driven to take action, yet feel paralysed about how to get started. The turn toward consulting services in this area is increasingly present to compensate for this lack of knowledge and expertise; alternatively, tools providing easily translated business metrics, or even more so a network of best practices can bridge part of this inertia by inspiring replicable behaviours, methodologies and actions.

5.2 Providing pragmatic solutions to managers

Building on the work of Shields and Shelleman (2017) and Sharma et al. (2018), the results of the present inquiry point towards the need for more strategic, holistic tools for the SME market. Indeed, in alignment with Kuhndt's (2004) and Tsaslis et al.'s (2013) case that SME managers' benefit from tools and systems to inform strategic and operational decisions, participants commend the value provided by holistic, business-oriented tools that directly address well-understood governance and business activities. Given the opportunity to outline what represents a useful and relevant tool in their own, lived experience, they referred extensively to the feature of the BIA which adapts the tool to given business and operational models to provide tailored, almost step by step guidelines to evaluate the baseline and personal areas of improvement. Particularly when used as a hands-on, iterative roadmap process, micro-level tools have the potential to lead organisations to dynamically understand their own materiality across all the dimensions of CS (*Camilleri 2017*), exposing the internal and external strategic value of tracking their sustainability performance metrics. This is a key factor in bridging the intimidation and paralysis felt by many SMEs (Johnson 2013, Johnson and Schaltegger 2015), allowing them to leverage the derived sustainability information to advise business decisions.

Nonetheless, in addition to the need for a pragmatic tool to guide internal monitoring and management, a majority of interviewees deplore the unclear guidelines available to them to communicate externally to their stakeholders about their commitments and performance in creating shared value. The need for a common, comparable language in which to report thus remains a key claim for practitioners, in line with Biondi et al. (2000) and Kuhndt (2004). This study demonstrates that, whilst the perception of a framework like the SDGs as a universal guideline against which to communicate sustainability and impact performance is well established in the literature (Topple et al. 2017), insights from the field reflect a contrasted perception of their value and applicability. On one hand, the SDGs are indeed perceived as a

globally understood, translatable code that are easy to communicate about visually and to broadly associate impact areas to. On the other, both managers and enablers report that due to their distance from relevant business metrics, the SDGs remain umbrella indicators used loosely, too often without concrete evidence. This generates counterproductive confusion and porous information for consumers, investors, regulators, and supply chains. SMEs are thus further hindered in their attempt at straightforwardly understanding, managing, and reporting their performance in a transparent and accountable way easily grasped by their stakeholders.

SMEs thus require an integrated, “two-in-one” solution that allows them to align their measurements and monitoring processes with on one hand, the reality of their own business, and on the other, a coherent, standardized reporting framework which can be used to conform with the information and transparency needs of all stakeholders.

5.3 Leveraging collective learning effects

Furthermore, interviewed SMEs, particularly younger businesses, posit that an important enabling factor rendering the sustainability management journey more practicable is the access to inspiring, practical and replicable examples and best practices. This finding intersects with Sharma et al. (2018) and Marquis and Lee’s (2015) vision of communities of practices through which peer learning can ensue. Considering the lack of resources available for SME’s to invest in exploring, understanding, and tailoring practical applications of the tools and improvement of their strategies, the convenience of short case studies and best practices as provided amongst other by the BIA network both removes important hurdles and provides useful cues at the beginning of their journey.

Additionally, interviewed B-Corporations highlight that as their own performance strengthens, members tend to embrace an active role as ambassadors to inspire and captivate other players’ interest and initiative. The build-up of a network as advocated by the B-Lab thus appears to

empower momentum and direct and indirect peer support for organisations starting the sustainability appraisal journey. The insights collected thus support emerging initiatives by, amongst other, the SDG Standards' (*in press*) to compile similar databases of best practices at the level of SDG indicators, encouraging it as a pathway to translating them to become a more accessible reference framework for SMEs over time.

VI. Conclusions

The transition to a sustainable future requires the business sector to play its full role in catalysing more responsible production and consumption habits to safeguard global social and environmental well-being. This cannot happen without the buy-in of SMEs, who have a crucial role to play in local ecosystems and international value chains (Revell et al. 2008, Brammer et al. 2011, Johnson 2013). Through qualitative conversations with key informants and practitioners, this paper collected valuable insights about the sustainability journey of SMEs, bridging a surprising lack of empirical inquiry into the drivers, hurdles and potential enablers of a more strategic integration of sustainability at SMEs' core. It shows that SMEs feel intimidated and paralysed by a solution-market which does not cater to their needs, instead straining their knowledge and resources with options that are scattered, demanding and ambiguous.

Fulfilling its research aims, this paper identified which features of dedicated tools could appropriately respond to SME's reality and thus effectively accelerate their sustainability management journeys. Diving deeper into their perception and use of the BIA and the SDG frameworks, it demonstrates that harmonized, pragmatic solutions and communities of practices ought to be the focus of tools catering for smaller companies' burgeoning corporate sustainability paths. Firstly, features which translate relevant consideration to business-level language and metrics, building a baseline of their sustainability performance and supporting organisations in developing step-by-step roadmaps for improvements were seen as key to help

managers transition to “thinking sustainability”. Additionally, bridging the knowledge and resource-gap can be done by providing access to a community of peers and actionable best-practices to inspire and encourage businesses to implement sustainability-driven processes and initiatives that have the potential to help them turn intention into action. Finally, more coherent guidelines to convert business-level performance data into standardized stakeholder-oriented reports and transparent communication are required to remove additional burdens and allow SMEs to reap the market-driven benefits of managing and reporting on their sustainability.

Overall, this paper contributed to a better understanding of the mismatch between the demand and supply of corporate sustainability management solutions for SMEs, informing the development of more tailored, relevant and appropriate tools in the future.

VII. Implications for practice and research

This investigation endeavours to support the understanding of the needs and experiences of SME in the emergent landscape of CS and call for further empirical research and appropriate practical solutions and support to stimulate these businesses’ transition to more sustainable management. The scope of this project focused on a limited sample of both tools and informants, and multitude of other perspectives and frameworks ought to be critically assessed to generate stronger, scalable generalisations. Additionally, the infancy of approaches aiming to connect businesses with the SDGs, for example, calls for ongoing research and analysis to test their accessibility and utility for SMEs. Constrained by time and resources, this study came short of accessing insights from mainstream businesses not yet committed to reflecting on their own sustainability performance, in essence “preaching to the choir” of already conscious organisations. Whilst the insights and conclusions presented above are relevant starting points to identify barriers and levers to support SMEs in this space, further research is essential to understand how to clearly communicate the economic and societal value and onboard these organisations by providing them appropriate means, creating a “path of least resistance”.

VIII. References

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IX. Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Categorisation

Participant Identifier	Category	Type of Participant	Location
SC	Enabler	Consulting firm focusing on the strategy development, implementation, evaluation and thought leadership in the space of sustainability management and reporting.	Lisbon, PT
SS	Enabler	Organisation working globally to provide consulting services in the space of sustainability and impact management and impact finance.	International
PC	Enabler	Consulting firm supporting companies seeking to formalise their sustainability journey using the B-Lab methodology.	International
M	Enabler	Financial intermediary (impact VC) and impact accelerator program working with early ventures and start-ups with impact-driven missions.	Lisbon, PT
I	User	Enterprise with a social mission to connect social sector organisations with resources, volunteers and partnerships, formalising their mission and business model through the B-Corp certification in the last year.	Lisbon, PT
SF	User	Family-owned viticultural producer implementing sustainability-driven policies for decades and recently formalising it through the B-Corp certification.	Porto, PT
N	User	Early-stage circular urban farming venture engaging with the B-Corp Impact Assessment and Certification process from the onset.	Lisbon, PT
MG	User	Zero-waste, bulk-based store in the process of applying for the B-Corp certification.	Lisbon, PT
B	Enabler	Non-profit organisation representing the B-lab initiative in Portugal, supporting companies undertaking the impact assessment and seeking to get certified.	Lisbon, PT
L	Enabler	Strategy and change consultancy working with companies to embed and scale their impact.	International
IM	Enabler	International organisation driving forward open consultation impact and sustainability measurement and performance methodologies and standards.	International
R	User	Young, impact-driven venture engaging with different impact methodologies as it grows.	Lisbon, PT
BL	Enabler	International organisation driven to align businesses behind the B-Corp methodology and collaborating with international organisations to define corporate sustainability standards and promote the SDGs.	International

Appendix B: Semi-structure interview protocol

Users

As a small enterprise, how do you measure and manage your performance? Why?

How are strategic decisions informed in your organisation?

Do you use tools to measure and manage your impact?

Which ones and why / why not?

If you are familiar with the BIA, what is your experience with it?

How do you think about the SDGs with regards to your business?

Do you use the SDGs as a tool in your business? In what form?

What value do you see in using the SDGs as a reference for business activities?

Enablers

How would you qualify/describe the evolution of the impact/sustainability performance landscape?

What is the experience of mainstream SMEs beginning to engage on a sustainability journey?

How does it differ from larger organisations?

How are the SDGs shaping the landscape since their inception?

What is the uptake of the SDGs and tools? Are there significant differences between mainstream and social enterprises?

Appendix C: Overview of first level coding and pattern-finding

Investigated theme	First level Category
Activities	
Before formalization	
Drivers	Internal
	External
Market	
Organisational	Leadership
	SME Experience
	Strategic
Outcomes	External
	Internal
	Network
Strategic	Leadership
	Ecosystem Value
	Willingness to change
	Use of the SDGs
Structure & Tools	Large scale standards
	Emergence of tools
	Pain Points
	SME Experience
	Tools Application
	Tools Combination
	Use of the SDGs

Appendix D: Overview of the thematic analysis of collected data into research findings

Topic	Insights from the participants	Summarized as	Emerging themes
Drivers	<p><i>I feel like with time as companies themselves are changing by hiring younger people and bringing an interest in sustainability that is more than just communication related, I feel that companies are doing a better job at trying to determine their actual effect and impact. (M)</i></p> <p><i>Like any organisations, if SMEs don't see the business value from it directly from a market share, customer direction, they are getting it from their employees, especially if they are trying to hire and employ younger generations. (PC)</i></p> <p><i>It is a matter of organising and taking more seriously some objectives and some goals. We now have the commitment to our consumers, clients and broader population regarding our goals. (SF)</i></p>	Internal desire and talent push to evolve towards more responsible models.	Internal drivers of "corporate citizenship" are leading SMEs to question their models and take initiative towards understanding and potentially changing their business and signalling this to the market.
	<p><i>The company feels that it is important to communicate and to give the consumer and the public the idea of our values and our path. (SF)</i></p> <p><i>They have to go through a certain evaluation, and they themselves have more and more CSR assets to highlight also because they are starting to have CSR strategies and things they can talk about. (SS)</i></p>	Highlighting what is being done and emphasizing it internally and externally.	
	<p><i>They feel like the market is asking for more, and also their stakeholders, and they need to get the house clean, have evidence to back up their claims, build up pillars of responsibility to engage their stakeholders. (SC)</i></p> <p><i>There's always uncertainty about what their level of ambition should be in terms of anything around sustainability, they like to understand what their peers and competitors are doing, where the markets are at and where it's going to make sure they have a view on where they should go and what leadership position they should take on any particular causes or issues.</i></p> <p><i>For our consumers, it is also useful tool, we could become more credible and an example, a leader in the market. (MG)</i></p>	Market dynamics are driving attention to these key issues and asking more from businesses when it comes to responsibility, transparency and positive impact.	External market drivers are pushing for companies of all sizes to increasingly comply and communicate transparently about their performance along sustainability metrics.

	<p><i>A lot of the companies that are talking to us, especially smaller service company, 5 to 30 people, and they are all saying the same things, one that it is becoming expected from the market and we have to do it. (PC)</i></p> <p><i>The regulatory landscape is pushing also large businesses to report on their supply chain, so there's pressure there too for smaller actors to provide information and be more transparent, and for that they have to have some sort of system to measure and show it. (SS)</i></p> <p><i>As NFRD is being revised, investors have to disclose ESG information, so the companies have to disclose on these issues as well. For me there is a snowball effect because SMEs are often inserted in the value chains of large companies, so de facto they are asked and they are obliged to demonstrate non-financial information. (R)</i></p>	<p>Regulatory development are putting pressure on larger organisations to track their value chains, shifting the spotlight to smaller companies to manage and be able to communicate on their performance.</p>	
Needs of SMEs	<p><i>Everybody is speaking about the issue now, at executive level also, but then people in those trainings say "so what do I do on Monday", they don't know what to do and how to bring it into action. (B)</i></p> <p><i>I think that's like the big struggle is why you know, I think they understand the "so what" of "Should be thinking about this", I should be able to credibly answer it and see how it would inform my decisions, but then any more detailed like reporting or performance measurement and management is a lot of work so I think that's that's the biggest challenge. (IM)</i></p> <p><i>I think we lack strategy, we want to do it, but we lack strategy. (MG)</i></p> <p><i>How can I justify spending this much time and energy and money sometimes on something that like I know I care about and my investors care about I think they should care about I want to be able to answer the questions well but like what level of detail is appropriate given I actually have to run a business to like you're you're not gonna have any impact of your business fails, so you're gonna have to like find a balance of like running a good business and then doing having as much impact as possible and I think that's like the big struggle. (IM)</i></p>	<p>Small businesses are increasingly aware of sustainability imperatives, yet lack the understanding of how to get started to track where they are at and implement change.</p> <p>Identifying and embedding a business case of sustainability management and effective translation is beyond the available resources of smaller organisations</p>	<p>Small businesses are beginning to really understand the need to engage on these issues, but struggle to strategically and operationally address them.</p>
Obstacles	<p><i>I see it as being that tension of like "I think this could really like matter to me my business, I just like cannot find the hours of the day", so it is a lack of resources and capacities and then like having to justify whatever resources you spend.</i></p>	<p>Small organisations lack the resources and capacity to dive into the tools and methodologies available.</p>	<p>The current evolution of the landscape is not fostering a constructive move towards catering to the needs of smaller organisations.</p>

	<p><i>If we were to talk in general terms, I think there is a problem of multiplication of tools, we don't know where to put our heads and which one to use. There is a problem of resources, time and skills. It's complicated for small businesses, so it's moving, but slowly. (SS)</i></p> <p><i>I think this kind of lack of clarity in what are the rules is not helpful, especially for small companies which do not know a lot and don't have the time and resources to invest in sorting through the different rules and frameworks. (B)</i></p> <p><i>There is still too many options out there, people are constantly bringing out new tools and I feel there is so much confusion on trying to decide which one is relevant for them. It's tough to decide which one to make a bet on because you don't want to get organised around one process and framework and then suddenly you find out that it is not going to support how you want to position yourself internally or externally, and then you have to do another one. (PC)</i></p> <p><i>We're still in this boiling point where everyone is developing their own score and their own scoring system, but I think it's going to converge at some point. There is an awareness on the part of the actors that it is necessary to standardize at one time or another because otherwise nothing is comparable. It's a real problem. But it's very slow. For the moment it's blooming from right to left. (SS)</i></p>	<p>There is an abundance of emerging tools which is rendering the landscape ever more confusing for smaller businesses</p>	
	<p><i>They often struggle with reaching alignment also and facing a challenge as they either chose to be involved with specific frameworks like B Corp or CDP or GRI or DowJones and as more and more frameworks get pushed upon them, teams are struggling to continue to engage the organisations to obtain more datapoints to support another disclosure framework, how to organize that, etc. (LL)</i></p> <p><i>We had to structure it in a general way along the lines of B Corp but also needed to really customize it to our needs and our company and each branches. (I)</i></p> <p><i>We balance it, we use it for example as we do with the materiality matrix. We have a tool to help companies to balance about external and internal relevance of some topics. The next step is to apply the SDG Compass and principles. They are all connected so you can use them and adjust them to the context of your company in order to deliver the best output and the most appropriate output for your clients. (SC)</i></p> <p><i>It's still the early days, there's a ton of innovation with it, so everyone is still trying to determine exactly if and how to use it, how to take it, how it's intended to be used, use it in that way and then come up with a bunch of different ways to use it. (PC)</i></p>	<p>The abundance of tools and prevailing lack of direct match for business metrics leads organisations to need to combine several tools into a tailored approach.</p>	<p>Companies and enablers are needing to adapt several tools into a relevant one, which is resource-intensive and not user friendly.</p>

BIA	<p><i>"With the B-Corp certification, we did the assessment and it was regarding the previous year, so we saw how much we actually were already doing and that it was giving us also already a minimum to be a B-Corp certification. And now we know a lot of actions to improve and give more emphasis on them. It is a very evolutive process, and we are also very enthusiastic and dynamic about it, we are not looking at it as a static approach." (SF)</i></p> <p><i>I mean certification is one element of it but the process of going through the B impact assessment and mapping improvements based upon that, reflecting on what you do and and what you want to do, we really talk about it as organizational transformation in order to future proof your business (PC).</i></p>	Organisations use the BIA as a roadmap against which to track improvement and define goals.	The B Impact Assessment framework effectively supports enterprises in mapping their current baseline and dynamically identifying avenues for improvements, setting goals and tracking progress.
	<p><i>The strategic side was always there, but the B-Corp certification structured the approach and raised additional and useful questions and things to formalize internally also. It made us make more concrete plans to prove our commitments and make changes operationally. (I)</i></p> <p><i>Since the beginning of this year and also because during the BCorp certification we started to notice that you know, there are a lot of things that we should be measuring and that are not really being measured in a real way (II).</i></p> <p><i>Starting the assessment would be good to make them aware of what they should be thinking about and be integrating. (M)</i></p>	The B Impact Assessment process led organisations to identify what they should be measuring to assess their performance.	
	<p><i>It's just very useful, and action, practical oriented as opposed to a methodology that you have to invest a lot in learning and understanding and figuring out how to implement it. (PC)</i></p> <p><i>I found that especially for companies that do not have sustainability competencies in house, like a leader or department, I found that at the core, the B Impact Assessment and B-Lab ecosystems provide a database of global best practices that a company can use and chose which ones to implement that align with its own priorities. (PC)</i></p>	The BIA smoothly onboards new companies into an easily manageable, key in hand process with actionable, inspiring and replicable best practices	Providing acces to a network of peers, best practices and actionable ideas and guides makes the B Impact Assessment a valuable starting tool for smaller businesses.
	<p><i>Some of our neighbours and competitors already reached out because they want to find out more about the process, it is really good news, we are inspiring others to do the right thing. (SF)</i></p>	The B-Lab framework and community provide inspiration, motivation and opportunities to learn from peers and spread the message	

	<p><i>The more we know about B-Corp, the more inspired we become and find out about initiatives across the world and share knowledge. It is a great network to lead by example.</i></p> <p><i>The network of B-Corp also makes us, beyond our own mission, be an example and lead more awareness, you are upholding a higher standard and need to be accountable for it and demonstrate that you do things better. (IT)</i></p>	and inspire others to take action also.	
SDGs	<p><i>We don't use the SDGs yet, we are planning to do so in the next step, using the Action Manager from B-Corp and UNGC. It is important for us to give us the alignment and the transparency. (I)</i></p> <p><i>To be completely honest we have not done a whole lot with the SDG action manager yet. We want to but need to find the right opportunity. (PC)</i></p>	The interviewed enablers are yet to really use the SDG tools for their core activities and services.	Despite growing attention being given to the issues and the emergence of tools targeting their application for business, the participants are yet to use them more thoroughly.
	<p><i>Obviously the SDGs are not really designed for business (IT).</i></p> <p><i>You know that those 169 targets were defined considering government and not companies, and that is why they don't suit the corporate perspective, that's why you have to define your own commitments at your scale and adapted to your business. (S)</i></p> <p><i>From the corporate perspective is still not clear because the millennial development goals, the previous ones, they didn't ask anything from companies, but today we all as a society are asked to do something different and maybe this call to action individual, corporate and from the governmental perspective wasn't communicated in such a clear way. (SS)</i></p>	The SDGs are not business-oriented.	The nature of the SDGs and the methodology through which they were developed represents an obstacle for their strategic use, as there is a mismatch between the SDG indicators and business KPIs and metrics.
	<p><i>The problem with the SDGs is that the indicators and metrics are simultaneously too macro-level and also way too specific in that orientation so that you can relate to them but they don't match really to organisational or business metrics. (M)</i></p> <p><i>When we looked in more detail at the SDG indicators, they are hyper-macro indicators. And so they are not applicable or difficult to apply to small enterprises or NGOs. So what we did was to think about indicators for this program for Oxfam first, and then make a link with the SDGs, but we never had, in any case, an indicator that was really aligned with those of the SDGs (SS)</i></p>	The current SDG frameworks and its associated tools are not yet appropriately linking the targets and indicators to business-relevant KPIs.	

	<p><i>The SDGs are good because they are very clean and easy to understand and it is easy to attach your business, regardless of the business models, to goals or subgoals. (R)</i></p> <p><i>The SDGs are very visual, in terms of communication they work very well and I think that is why they are so well regarded. It's much easier than many other initiatives, it's really powerful as a communication tools, and it's not used in the best way always, but it is trendy, it can easily be integrated in companies reports and websites. It's a universal code that is widely understood and a good stepping stone. (B)</i></p> <p><i>On the one hand, I think it's a very good overall framework for implementing environmental and social objectives. I think that everyone now knows and understands them, both in financial institutions, investors, companies and NGOs (SS)</i></p>	<p>The SDGs are a universally recognized and understood and easy to communicate about due to their colourful identity.</p>	<p>The SDGs are a useful communication tool, but lack depth and are currently not being used as a strategic tool or a truly informative signal to stakeholders.</p>
	<p><i>So the SDGs have been very useful in making the "what" much more accessible, but it hasn't totally pushed better practice and including the who and how much. (I)</i></p> <p><i>In general companies like to use the SDGs because they are easy to communicate and easy to understand, but they don't dig deeper in terms of their position. (M)</i></p> <p><i>I think it is a challenge because it takes value out of the SDGs when you see them everywhere related to business that are not absolutely providing impact so unless you are willing to take a step further and really understand how and why they are working on it, otherwise it means really little. (M)</i></p>	<p>Few organisations justify their action to contribute to the SDGs in depth, providing evidence of their performance and/or progress.</p>	